

## COMMENTARY

## “With just one click”: online health information is abundant, but can it be trusted?

Earlier this year, Harris Interactive reported that nearly 100 million individuals use the Internet to search for health information.<sup>1</sup> They do so, on average, 3 times a month, mostly using a portal or search engine. For those who do go online, the Internet offers searchers instant access to thousands of web pages offering health information—all with the click of a computer mouse. This vast array of informational resources presents both opportunities and challenges for consumers and health care providers.<sup>2</sup> Access to the latest scientific information will hopefully allow consumers to make more informed decisions about their health care. But because almost anyone can make a web site available through the Internet, the types of information that can be found can vary significantly.<sup>3</sup> How do consumers know whether they can trust what they find?

This study by Zingmond and colleagues examines the types of web-site content offered by acute care hospitals in California. Of the 390 hospitals examined, 331 (85%) offered some type of a web site. The researchers also report that 70% of those web sites provided some form of health information, and 22% offered access to information regarding clinical trials. The researchers also compared web site characteristics by profit status and network affiliation.

They found that hospitals with a for-profit status were less likely to provide health-related content on their web site than hospitals with a nonprofit status.

Although the Internet may be a useful tool for hospitals and health care providers to fill the information gap for their patient populations, many questions remain regarding how to use this technology in a way that is helpful to both patients and health care providers. The variation in the types of content found by Zingmond and associates indicates that many hospitals are trying to take advantage of this new digital technology. Their findings also suggest that future research is needed to help content developers design and assess online informational resources that are of true benefit to patients and their families.

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None declared

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## References

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- 2 Griffiths KM, Christensen H. Quality of web-based information on treatment of depression: cross sectional survey. *BMJ* 2000;321:1511-1515.
- 3 Impicciatore P, Pandolfini C, Casella N, Bonati M. Reliability of health information for the public on the world wide web: systematic survey of advice of managing fever in children at home. *BMJ* 1997;314:1875-1879.

## Two views of the same data

An article in the October *wjm* by Chen and colleagues (p 236) and one published by the same authors in the *Journal of Family Practice* appear similar in that they are drawn from data from the same study. The two present fundamentally different views, however, and are intellectually unique. We advise readers of these parallel presentations and, in the future, will alert readers of such a situation at the time of publication.